

BY THE DAWN'S EARLY LIGHT

A LIFE IS SAVED

The California Air National Guard, the Marine Corps, and the Navy work together on a daring joint rescue mission 600 miles at sea to save the life of a submariner.

PHOTO BY GENERAL DYNAMICS, ELECTRIC BOAT DIVISION

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129th Rescue Wing

You've never read about it, and you haven't seen it on TV. The Navy still isn't discussing it, but it was one of the most daring at-sea joint rescue missions attempted in recent times, and the California Air National Guard was a major participant.

The 129th Rescue Wing, whose motto "These things we do that others may live," combined with "A Few Good Men" blended into a dramatic mission August 23, 2003 when the California Air National Guard unit and the U.S. Marine Corps teamed for a dangerous rescue mission 600 miles at sea in the Pacific Ocean.

A 23-year-old Navy sailor aboard a submarine was facing life threatening consequences as a result a severe kidney ailment that, without immediate medical attention, could have resulted in kidney failure. Normally, the 129th has the assets to conduct long-range over water search and rescue missions, but current operations tempo had strained normal resources. The unit had an HH-60G Pavehawk helicopter available at

Moffett Federal Airfield, the home of the 129th, but the unit's only available MC-130 Combat Shadow tanker was on its way to Florida on another mission.

A call went out to the Marine Corps, which had previously trained with Air Force rescue aircraft and whose KC-130 Hercules can air-to-air refuel the Pavehawks. The Corps, eager to help, sent a KC-130 from the "Raiders" of Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 352 from Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, near San Diego. "We have trained with the Air Guard many times before, and it's all been very smooth, but never on anything like real-world search and rescue," said Marine Corps aviator and mission co-pilot, Captain Roy W. Moore. "We hit the ground ready to learn."

The 129th's MC-130 was recalled from its Florida mission while planners analyzed the challenges and envisioned various scenarios to successfully complete the mission. After deciding on the best course of action, the staff organized medical teams from the Coast Guard,

Navy and Air Guard and plotted the best place to rendezvous with the submarine, in the middle of the ocean, at night, and with the knowledge that no one in the 129th had ever removed a patient from a submarine before. Our only real concern was that we were flying using the Night Vision Goggles and the Marine Corps KC-130 pilots were not, so we had to be very careful," said HH-60 pilot First Lieutenant Hung Nguyen.

The tankers, helicopters, and crews assembled at Moffett Field and lifted off at 2:00 a.m. The crew included pilots Captain John Brunner and First Lieutenant Hung Nguyen, Flight Engineers

Technical Sergeant Chris Lassiter and Senior Airman Shane Cook, Pararescuemen (PJs) Chief Master Sergeant Scott Simpson and Senior Airman Clay Bendle.

Aboard the submarine, the sailor's medical condition stabilized somewhat but still remained critical. Because of the nuclear submarine's classified operations, the flight crews had only the submarine's grid square on a map rather than its exact location. The helicopter and

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KC-130 flew more than 600 miles over the Pacific and waited for the submarine to surface. Two hours after take off, the helicopter needed refueling from the KC-130. This is a dangerous procedure under optimal conditions and in the dark it's quite a challenge. "Refueling over water at night is not our usual helicopter refueling scenario," Moore said, "but we flew at a similar speed and waited for the helicopter to catch up to us. All we could see was a little red light from the HH-60."

After refueling the HH-60 twice, the KC-130 increased speed and went on ahead to locate the submarine. In the helicopter, the crew reviewed procedures and the challenges associated with bringing a patient and PJs aboard the helicopter at night. The KC-130 contacted the submarine and circled at 11,000 feet until submarine personnel confirmed they were ready. The KC-130 also served as a radio patch between the submarine, the HH-60, and the additional tanker launched from Moffett to refuel the helicopter on its way home. "The



An HH-60G helicopter from the 129th Rescue Wing (similar to those pictured here) and a marine KC-130 flew more than 600 miles over the Pacific to wait for the submarine to surface.

PHOTO BY TSGT ANDREW HUGHAN

weather was beautiful and the sea was calm, so this was a good scenario for a successful mission," Moore said.

Just after dawn, the helicopter approached the surfaced submarine and the pilots hovered the HH-60 above the sub and behind its conning tower. "The Navy was totally squared away when we got there; they had the patient ready in the rescue harness and ready to go," said Nguyen. "We lowered the PJ's and made one orbit around the sub, came in and picked them up." Total time from drop-off to pick-up: seven minutes. "I could see Chief Simpson shaking hands with the deck crew as we hoisted him up," said Lieutenant Nguyen. "And off we went."

On the flight home, the C-130 tanker from Moffett had arrived on station and the Marine Corps aircraft returned to Miramar. "This was a great experience for the Marine Corps and the

Guard and we felt very comfortable with every phase of the operation," said Moore.

The 129th C-130 refueled the helicopter twice on the way back to the coast. When the aircraft were over land, the tanker headed for Moffett Federal Airfield and the HH-60 went to a waiting ambulance at a soccer field at Stanford University.

"People talk about joint operations all the time, but what made this work was everyone was willing to be flexible enough to make the mission go very smoothly," said Lieutenant Nguyen. "Rescue operations are difficult and dangerous undertakings. The cooperation between joint services and local emergency personnel, however, resulted in a satisfying and life-affirming effort. This was the 304th life saved by the 129th Rescue Wing with every member of this joint team exemplifying the mission of "These things we do that others may live." 🍷